

From “Sea of Grass” to “Wire and Rail”: Melville’s Evolving Perspective on the Prairies

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During the nineteenth century, Euroamericans held diametrically opposed views of the American prairie as it spread westward from the Appalachians: on the one hand, explorers considered it to be the “Great American Desert”;¹ on the other, developers considered it a new Eden. Writing in mid-century, Herman Melville contemplates both of these perspectives in *Moby-Dick*. In the opening chapter of his best-known novel, for example, his narrator, Ishmael, challenges a metaphysical professor to find water in “the great American desert,”² while later in chapter forty-two, he perceives the prairie as “the unfallen western world,” where “Adam walked majestic as a god” (MD 191). In works written throughout the nineteenth century, from *Mardi* (1849), to *Clarel* (1876), to some of his last poems appearing through 1890, Melville represents the prairie in diverse ways, revealing an environmental consciousness about the great grasslands of the North American interior.

With the nonhuman environment providing the context for most of his writing, Melville was in good company throughout the nineteenth century. In 1988 Leo Marx asserted his conviction that James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain, “measure[d] the quality of American life against something like an ecological ideal.” He was followed in 1995 by Lawrence Buell, who testifies that numerous nineteenth-century writers, men and women as well as people of various ethnic backgrounds, were “environmentally oriented” in their writ-

ing.³ Written thirty years after Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* emphasizes the necessity of reading the nonhuman environment "not merely as a framing device," but as having a significant interest beyond that of human interest, and as involving natural processes. Buell also posits that in environmentally oriented literature, "*Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation* (Buell's italics)."⁴ Certainly, other American writers, including Cooper, Washington Irving, Margaret Fuller, Caroline Kirkland, William Cullen Bryant, Whitman, and Twain, like Melville, journeyed to the prairies and subsequently wrote about them.⁵ This essay seeks to demonstrate, however, that no other nineteenth-century writer contemplated the prairie in so many ways, representing not only its natural diversity but also the immense changes to which it was subjected, over such an extended period of time, as did Melville and that Melville's evolving perspective of the prairies would today be identified as ethical and environmental.

During his lifetime (1819-1891), if Melville was at all known as a writer, it was primarily for his concern with remote islands in distant seas; in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it is primarily his maritime works—*Typee*, *Moby-Dick*, *Billy Budd*—which have similarly been the focus for his popular reputation. Unlike his contemporaries, Irving, Cooper, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Twain, who are now popularly and critically known for writings grounded in American places, Melville is usually associated with international seas rather than with the national landscape. However, although Melville notes in *Moby-Dick* that the sea may well cover "two-thirds of this terraqueous globe" (MD 64), using the imperative voice, Ishmael urges his readers to "consider them both, the land and the sea" (MD 274) as Melville himself did with increasing interest.

Diane Dufva Quantic in her *Study of Great Plains Fiction* observes that "the character of the nation's center" reflects a "confusing collection of ideas," based on the conflict between mythic expectations regarding space and political and economic expectations.⁶ Although Quantic fails to consider Melville in her study, in the course of his long writing career, Melville reveals the conflict among ways of representing the prairie. Throughout his work, but especially in his earlier writing, his images of the prairie are metaphorical, concerned to illuminate land-based readers' lack of understanding of the sea, but also emphasizing the prairie's fecundity, diversity, and processes. In *Moby-Dick*, not only does Melville embrace alternative ideas about the prairie, as I have already noted, but he also moves from an idealized pastoral vision of the prairies as suggesting "an unfallen western world" to a description of the prairie's degradation through the cultivation, commerce, and greed explicitly brought on by Euroamericans. While Melville's metaphorical use of prairie images in his early writings may, in Buell's terms, appear anthropocentric, in *Moby-Dick* as well as in his later work, *Clarel* and *John Marr and Other Poems* (1888), his ethical environmental orientation is evident, as he expresses his dismay regarding the changes wrought by Euroamerican settlement and development. These later works make clear

Melville's awareness of the tragic loss of the prairies and the demise of its plant, animal, and human inhabitants, his awareness of the process by which the prairie was transformed from an American Eden into an American grid, the fallen western world. Although Melville's proto-environmental stance in *Moby-Dick* has been recognized,⁷ the extent of his environmental vision as a protector of the grasslands, has not.

Melville Sees the Prairie as Diverse Ecosystem: The "Unfallen Western World"

In the opening chapter of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael ponders his reasons for going to sea, asking rhetorically, "Are the green fields gone?"⁸ The implied answer is that they are indeed gone, for during the first half of the nineteenth century, North America's forests, fields, farmlands, and meadows were rapidly depleted due to overdevelopment and overpopulation, not only on the eastern seaboard, but increasingly in the middle west. Consequently, young men, like Melville himself, who might once have found work in farming or lumbering on the eastern seaboard, were forced to head out either to sea or to the inland prairies in search of employment.⁹ Thus, in a futile attempt to find satisfying work in New York or New England in the spring of 1840, Melville himself tried the green fields of the prairies, leaving the Atlantic seaboard to head inland to visit his uncle Thomas Melvill in Galena, Illinois.

Herman's mother, Maria, wrote that in his journey to his uncle, he believed he was going to the "far-west."¹⁰ The "far-west" to which Melville headed was only as far as the Illinois prairies¹¹—a region with which he might have become familiar through contemporary newspapers which were encouraging development or through such literary works as Cooper's novel, *The Prairie* (1827); Bryant's poems, "An Indian at the Burial Place of His Fathers" (1824) and "The Prairie" (1832); or Irving's historical account, *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835).¹² Since 1842, Illinois has been known as The Prairie State, with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources presently testifying that the state originally consisted of fourteen million acres of forest and twenty-two million acres of prairie, most of which appeared in its northern two thirds.¹³ With his friend Eli Fly, Melville would have traveled through these Illinois prairies either by the Illinois Central Railroad, developed in 1839, or by one of two stage coach routes, which "had been opened only in 1834 and 1836 and were still not much more than marked-out lanes."¹⁴ By either route, he would have seen the prairies up close and personal, and judging from the title of an unpublished, late poem, "Trophies of Peace: Illinois in 1840,"¹⁵ Melville never forgot this particular landscape which in the nineteenth century comprised much of the mid-region of the continental United States, forming "the greatest grasslands on earth."¹⁶

Two critics, separated by six decades, John W. Nichol in 1951 and more recently Kevin J. Hayes in 2007, have recognized that this early, inland voyage to Illinois provided Melville with an opportunity to experience the American

frontier and American national geography.¹⁷ I believe, in addition, that this early, inland voyage led Melville to a lifetime of contemplation and writing about the prairie's significance, initially as a unique ecosystem and a site for American heroic myth-making and subsequently as a site of environmental and cultural degradation through Euroamerican development. Apart from Nichol's and Hayes' response, critical attention has not focused on the implications of the young Melville's journey to the Illinois prairies, but rather on the implications of his subsequent journeys at sea, following his decision to return to New England and to set sail on the whale ship, *Achusnet*, in early 1841.

As a twenty-one-year-old visitor to the prairie in 1840, Melville observed the grasslands as an endless sea of grass, as a complex, living ecosystem, bountiful and without boundaries. As he repeatedly remembers it in his third novel, *Mardi*, the prairie is "boundless," "endless," existing without delineation of either space or time.¹⁸ As such, the prairie is also associated with the iconic American value of freedom. "Free horses," Melville claims in *Mardi* "need wide prairies" like free people (M 526). In *Moby-Dick* Melville extends his memory of the prairie, comparing it to the sea as being immense and wild, incomprehensible and uncontrollable. He thus uses the prairie to help his land-bound readers understand not only the sea but also the sea's great creatures. In chapter seventy-five, Ishmael connects the right whale's "broad brow" (MD 335) to the prairie, anticipating what is perhaps Melville's best known reference to the prairie, his title for chapter seventy-nine, "The Prairie," which alludes to the sperm whale's brow—as vast, indecipherable, mystical as a prairie.

Melville's descriptions of the extremes of prairie weather throughout his works further evoke the unpredictability and the mystic of the prairie landscape. In *Mardi*, Melville recalls that the prairie may be as still as "an August noon" (M 567); in *Moby-Dick*, he refers to its "placidity" (MD 335), and later in *John Marr and Other Poems*, he writes that "Blank stillness would for hours reign unbroken on this prairie" (P 197).¹⁹ The prairie's quietude contrasts with its fires which are depicted raging furiously in several of Melville's novels as well as in Cooper's *The Prairie* and the works of several nineteenth-century painters, including George Catlin, Paul Kane, and Meyer Straus.²⁰ In *Redburn* (1849), a tornado appears "like a troop of wild horses before the flaming rush of a burning prairie";²¹ in *Moby-Dick* squalls "roar[], fork[], and crackle[] around . . . like a white fire upon the prairie" (MD 225); in *Clarel* (1876), he refers to the "broad" prairie fire,²² and in "After the Pleasure Party" (1890), to the "prairie-fires that spurn control, / Where withering weeds incense the flame" (P 260). Melville also knew, as did prairie Indians, and as do modern agronomists that fire nurtures a prairie, a fact which Babbalanja acknowledges in *Mardi*: "[P]rairies are purified by fire. Ashes breed loam" (M 500). Finally, Melville recognized that whereas "The backwoodsman of the West" might well view "an unbounded prairie sheeted with driven snow, no shadow of tree or twig to break the fixed trance of whiteness," with "comparative indifference," "the desolate shiftings of the windrowed snows of the prairies" could also cause profound terror (MD 194).

Throughout his writings, Melville's references to the profusion of plants and animals specific to the prairie ecosystem reflect his awareness of its complexity, its diversity, and its wild fecundity. Whereas, according to Quantic, Cooper "sets out to establish the desert quality of the Great Plains,"²³ Melville's word to describe its profusion and fertility is "luxuriant"—in *John Marr*, he exclaims in reference to this landscape, "Luxuriant this wilderness" (P 198).²⁴ Above all, there is grass. In his humorous description of Nantucket, Melville writes that on this sandy island "one blade of grass makes an oasis, three blades in a day's walk a prairie," adding that his verbal "extravaganzas only show that Nantucket is no Illinois" (MD 63).²⁵ Quantic points out that numerous writers, from the nineteenth century on, compare the sea of grass to the sea of brine: "It is a rare plains writer who does not invoke the image of the sea of grass."²⁶ Melville, in making the correspondence of undulating sea waves to rolling prairie grasses and of rolling prairie grass to undulating sea waves, was able to draw on his own first-hand knowledge of both land and sea. On entering the Pacific, Ishmael identifies these contemplative waters as "sea-pastures, wide-rolling watery prairies" (MD 482). Later in *Moby-Dick* he will connect "high rolling waves" with "the tall grass of a rolling prairie" (MD 491). In *Clarel*, Melville describes melliflously the "long rollings of the vast serene— / The prairie in her swimming swell / Of undulation" (I.17.28-30), and in *John Marr*, he writes that "some more enriched depressions between the long green graduated swells [of the prairie were] smooth as those of ocean becalmed receiving and subduing to its own tranquility the voluminous surge raised by far-off hurricane" (P 198). Although he asserts that John Marr is "no geologist," Melville reveals his own geological knowledge in the old sailor's supposition that the prairie is "'the bed of a dried-up sea'" (P 198).

In addition to the prairie's grasses, Melville contemplates its flowers. In *Mardi*, he generalizes about "the flowery prairies," proclaiming that "It's famous botanizing . . . in Arkansas' boundless prairies" (M 366, 39). At the beginning of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael encourages his readers to "Go visit the Prairies in June, when for scores on scores of miles you wade knee-deep among Tiger Lilies" (MD 5), and in both *Clarel* and *John Marr*, he refers again to these spectacular orange lilies, native to American prairies. His description in *Clarel* is precise: "Wild, wild in symmetry of mould, / With freckles on her tawny gold, / The lily alone looks pantherine— / The libbard [leopard]-lily" (I.17.20-23). In *Clarel*, he also refers to the prairie's pansies and imagines that the skull he finds near Indian mounds becomes "vined round and beautiful / With flowers," feeling as does Ishmael when he witnesses the whale's skeleton twined with greenery, "The floral revery over death" (I.17.148, 69-71).²⁷

For Melville, as they had for Irving, the bison verified the prairie's boundlessness, its abundance and wildness. According to naturalist Douglas H. Chadwick, current estimates place the number of bison on the North American prairie at their peak during the nineteenth century as between sixty and seventy million with "a combined weight greater than that of all the men, women, and children alive in the U. S. and Canada today." Chadwick notes, in addition to the numbers

of bison, the immense numbers of other animals populating the prairies: “perhaps 50 million pronghorn antelope. And millions of elk and deer. Plus plains grizzlies and buffalo wolves. Not to mention the host of smaller creatures: an estimated 5 billion prairie dogs, for instance.”²⁸ The fragment, titled “The River,” which Melville omitted from *The Confidence Man* (1857), describes “cornetted elk,” deer, and bear alongside the Mississippi River and suggests the size of the prairie’s bison herds by rapturously comparing them to the river itself, browsing like “a long-drawn bison herd on through the prairie.”²⁹ In *Moby-Dick*, he maintains that bison “overspread by tens of thousands the prairies of Illinois and Missouri,” “that the census of the buffalo in Illinois exceeded the census of men now in London,” which in 1851 was 2.3 million (MD 460–61).³⁰ This largest of North American mammals, though herbaceous, also signified for Melville a wild ferocity, apparent when they “shook their iron manes and scowled with their thunder-clotted brows” (MD 460) and most notably when, according to Ishmael, a buffalo robe was enough to throw a New England colt into spasms of terror.

Through a range of other prairie birds and animals besides the bison, Melville confirms his association of the prairie with diversity and abundance. While his anthropocentric metaphors in *Moby-Dick* assist Melville’s readers in understanding the wildness of the human crew as well as the concept of whiteness, they also reveal Melville’s persistent interest in the prairie’s creatures. Buell might argue that John Marr’s vision of the prairie is bounded by his personal despair, but Melville’s old sailor nonetheless observes changes in the life of the prairie with keen, objective perception. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville mentions that the Nantucketer “lives on the sea, as prairie cocks in the prairie” (MD 64); that the eyes of Ahab’s crew, following the announcement of his quest on the quarter-deck, meet their captain’s “as the bloodshot eyes of the prairie wolves meet the eye of their leader, ere he rushes on at their head in the trail of the bison” (MD 165); that the fears of this same crew on the second day of the chase resemble “timid prairie hares that scatter before the bounding bison” (MD 557). In *Moby-Dick*’s “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Melville mentions timorous prairie colts and exalts in “the White Steed of the Prairies, a magnificent milk-white charger.” The “Xerxes of vast herds of wild horses, whose pastures in those days were only fenced by the Rocky Mountains and the Alleghanies[,] . . . [marches] in the van of countless cohorts that endlessly streamed it over the plains, like an Ohio.” “Imperial and archangelical,” the beautiful white horse becomes synonymous with vision of “the unfallen western world” (MD 191), free, vigorous, powerful, mystical, and pristine. John Marr notices the continent’s inland birds: “the prairie-hen, sometimes startled from its lurking-place in the rank grass; and in their migratory season, pigeons, high overhead on the wing, in dense multitudes eclipsing the day like a passing storm-cloud” (P 197).

Melville’s prairie, as associated with the “unfallen western world,” while alive with diverse plants and animals, is sparsely populated by human beings. In “The River,” he personifies the Mississippi’s pleasure at the absence of humans, denoting a prelapsarian period. Where humans are “remote,” the river becomes

"Glad and content" and enters an "Unsung Time, the Golden Age" (CM 497). Appreciating the mounds created by Illinois' Indians in several of his works, as do other writers, including Cooper and Bryant, Melville comments on the absence of the people who constructed them.³¹ Numerous serpentine mounds appear in Ohio, Minnesota, and Illinois, and near Galena over a hundred conical and lineal burial mounds as well as two magnificent effigy sites have been located. It is uncertain, therefore, which particular mounds Melville would have seen although his repeated references to them suggest that they and their absent builders impressed him profoundly.³² In chapter seventy-five of *Mardi*, he specifically cites the Illinois Mounds as being among the most enduring monuments made by human cultures; in *Clarel*, he notes that Nathan's father, who had left New England's treacherous mountains and forests to farm the fertile Illinois prairies, lies buried "With sachems and mound-builders old" near "Three Indian mounds" which "Against the horizon's level bounds / Dim showed across the prairie green" (I.17.56-58). In *John Marr*, Melville explicitly identifies "a strange terrace, serpentine in form" (P 195), and poignantly, Marr buries his wife and child in a small mound near these great mounds.

Melville Sees the Prairie as Fragile Ecosystem: The Arrival of Euroamericans

At the time of Melville's visit to his uncle, the idea of an uninhabited western world or of an "Unsung, Golden Age" could only be mythical. The population of Illinois was booming. Scotch, Irish, English, and Scotch-Irish were arriving from the east coast as were large numbers of immigrants from other European countries, making the Prairie State one of the fastest-growing areas in the world. National policies under Andrew Jackson resulted simultaneously in the removal of Indians from Illinois and their replacement by Euroamerican farmers. In 1830 Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, which re-located indigenous people from the eastern coast in the middle and the far west, and as Jackson states in his second annual message to Congress, shortly after the Act's passage, it prepared the way for the settlement of "a dense and civilized population in large tracts of country now occupied by a few savage hunters."³³ That Jackson expected this population to largely consist of farmers is explicitly spelled out two years later in his fourth annual message to Congress: "The wealth and strength of a country are its population, and the best part of that population are the cultivators of the soil. Independent farmers are everywhere the basis of society and the true friends of liberty."³⁴ Doubling every ten years between 1820 and 1860, Illinois' population became increasingly dense, growing from 157,200 to 476,000 between 1830 and 1840, with many people arriving as a result of the low cost of land, rising grain prices, and promotion by the Illinois Central Railroad.³⁵

Cooper's 1827 novel describes the desultory impact settlers made on the prairie, and during his youthful journey to Illinois, Melville must have observed how the influx of Euroamericans had already changed it dramatically. In *Moby-*

Dick, he reflects explicitly on the historical movements of Euroamericans onto the prairies in the course of the nineteenth century, beginning with individual men—trappers and hunters (MD 191, 464)—who were followed by settlers and their families in wagons. Ishmael acknowledges the first inroads made by Euroamericans into the center of the continent, conceiving of these individuals in mythic terms, as heroes, living much like native people in relationship to the natural land. He admires “the traveler on the prairie [who] hunts up his own supper of game” (MD 426) and the trappers and hunters who visited the plains during “primeval times when Adam walked” and who observed in the magnificent “White Steed of the Prairies” “that unfallen western world.” When Melville writes *John Marr*, thirty-seven years later, however, these individuals are not romanticized or associated with pastoral myth. He notes simply that these “hunters [were] in main a race distinct from the agricultural pioneers, though generally their advance-guard” (P 197). Melville describes the arrival of these “agricultural pioneers” in similar terms in both *Moby-Dick* and *John Marr*. With the sea arousing “a land-like feeling” in him, Ishmael perceives a “distant ship reveal[ing] only the tops of her masts, as when the western emigrants’ horses only show their erected ears, while their hidden bodies widely wade through the amazing verdure” (MD 491).³⁶ For John Marr, “Hooped round by a level rim, the prairie was . . . a reminder of the ocean,” and here “[T]ravel was much like navigation.” In his memories, John Marr seems an older Ishmael as he, recalling identical details, invokes the national story of a prairie schooner, coming “over the grassy billows . . . [T]he emigrant-wagon [was] arched high over with sail-cloth, and voyaging across the vast champaign. . . . wading through the rank vegetation, and hidden by it,—or, failing that, when near to, in the ears of the team, peaking, if not above the tall tiger-lilies, yet above the yet taller grass” (P 197-98).

Settlement by Euroamericans resulted in plowing the prairie’s grasses and the consequent transformation of its diversity into monocultural farms. Many, including Emerson, validated this transformation. In 1833, the Illinois wheat crop was estimated at 1,500,000 bushels (Pease 383), and in 1844, Emerson proclaimed that “This great savage country should be furrowed by the plough and combed by the harrow; these rough Alleghanies should know their master; these foaming torrents should be bestridden by proud arches of stone; these wild prairies should be loaded with wheat; the swamps with rice; the hilltops should pasture innumerable sheep and cattle.”³⁷ Hayes asserts that Melville, seeing these new farms during his Illinois trip, understood them as representing “national fecundity.”³⁸ In *Moby-Dick*, in at least one instance, Melville certainly appears to laud the transformation of the prairies into fields “loaded with wheat.” In his description of brit, the yellow plankton on which the right whale feeds resembles “vast meadows . . . boundless fields of ripe and golden wheat,” and as the whales feed among these fields of brit, they appear as “morning mowers, who side by side slowly and seethingly advance their scythes through the long wet grass of marshy meads; even so these monsters swam, making a strange, grassy cutting

sound" (MD 272). In "The River" excerpt, Melville also appears to reinforce a perception of the prairie, converted to agriculture, as providing national bounty. Illinois land alongside the Mississippi is idealized as "exceeding fruitful," a basin serving as a "granary [for] a continent" where "nations [may] be greatly multiplied and blest" (CM 497). As Carolyn Merchant points out, "In settling, ranching, and plowing the Great Plains and Far West, Euroamerican migrants reversed the biblical Fall by turning the 'great American desert' into yet another garden of the world."³⁹ The garden, however, proved to be agricultural fields, fenced and plotted.

Melville Sees the Prairie as Degraded Ecosystem: The Fallen Western World

Although Melville's luscious descriptions of brit and of riparian farmlands imply his awe at the golden fields of grain he saw in Illinois in 1840, other passages in *Moby-Dick*, *Clarel*, and *John Marr and Other Poems* reveal his increasing awareness of the fact that such production came at a cost—the degradation and destruction of the unbounded, open prairie and its diverse ecosystem of plants and animals; of the homelands, cultures, and lives of indigenous peoples; and even of the new Euroamerican settlers themselves. In the latter part of his life, Melville was not alone in recognizing that the American environment had been degraded by development and commerce. Following the Civil War, the prairie and other western lands were opened to development and expansion as a result of railroads, photography, and agricultural technology.⁴⁰ Merchant testifies that "During the late nineteenth century, . . . [c]onservationists and preservationists, like the romantics, viewed with alarm the decline of a pristine earth exploited for its natural resources."⁴¹ The Adam whom Melville imagined in *Moby-Dick*, striding the unbounded prairies, "majestic as a god" (MD 191), and encountering the equally majestic White Steed, is now replaced by the realtor and the banker, whom he also describes in *Moby-Dick*, as well as by Nathan, farmer, land-developer, and colonizer in *Clarel*, and by John Marr, old sailor turned nostalgic and sorrowful.

Theodore Calvin Pease, writing in 1922, describes with enthusiasm the changes on the Illinois prairie between 1818 and 1848, changes which appalled Melville as he describes them in both *Moby-Dick* and *John Marr*: "The face of the country was surveyed into rectangular townships six miles square. These were defined by their number north or south . . . Each township was divided into thirty-six sections, each containing 640 acres and capable of division into quarters and similar divisions." Such land divisions made it possible, as Pease continues, for land purchases to be made for as low as \$1.25 an acre and for an intensification of land sales and land speculation (Pease 4). He points out that "the problem of the settler of this decade [1830-40] was to sustain himself on the land while he broke and fenced enough prairie to farm successfully. . . . [B]y breaking the tough prairie sod . . . settlers pushed out four or five miles into

the prairie.” In Pease’s description of the Illinois prairie’s transformation, greed is implicitly identified as the motivating force: “the inhabitants of Illinois, conscious of hidden riches, sought . . . to discover the key which would unlock the treasure and open the way to high reward. Farmers [groped] for better methods in securing the bounty of the rich prairie soil” (Pease 179, 383).

John Marr arrives on the prairies in 1838, close to the time of Melville’s own youthful visit. He apparently waits to tell his story until 1888, the year Melville publishes the former sailor’s biography in *John Marr and Other Poems* as a prose introduction to the poems. During the intervening fifty-year period, Marr witnesses the changes wrought on the great continental grasslands—following the appearance of early farming families, “the first sallow settlers” (P 198). In *Moby-Dick*, Melville had earlier expressed his dismay that the prairie had given way to “populous river capitals, where now the polite broker sells you land at a dollar an inch” (MD 460). Writing in *John Marr* more than thirty years after *Moby-Dick*, he spells out the results of these sales in precise detail. Where once there was not “a traceable road,” “[t]hroughout these plains, now [are] places over-populous with towns over-opulent; sweeping plains, . . . fenced off in every direction into flourishing farms . . . a region that half a century ago produced little for the sustenance of man, but to-day launching its superabundant wheat-harvest on the world; of this prairie, now everywhere intersected with wire and rail” (P 198). Thus the prairie’s wild boundlessness is curtailed and confined by survey lines and fences, its openness, wildness, and natural diversity giving way to agriculture, technology, and towns.

Perhaps referencing Bryant’s poems, “An Indian at the Burial Place of his Fathers” and “The Prairie,” which associate the Indian’s disappearance with the development of “wheat . . . green and high,” “the rustling of heavy grain / Over the dark-brown furrows,”⁴² Melville recognized agriculture’s impact upon the lives of indigenous peoples, forcing them to vacate their traditional lands. Pease, revealing his bias against indigenous peoples, explains that “Illinois extinguished Indian lands and titles with astonishing rapidity . . . Jackson’s federal policy of removal of the Indians to some trans-Mississippi territory was a confirmation of [Illinois farmers’] conviction that the land belonged to the white man; they welcomed the means it supplied of ridding the country of the redskin” (Pease 151–52). Population statistics indicate that in 1800, only 150 indigenous people continued to live in Illinois territory.⁴³

On his journey west, Melville may well have seen the canoes and wigwams of some native peoples as he suggests in *Moby-Dick* (MD 244). But this journey occurred just at the time that mid-western tribes, forced to abandon their homelands, were being driven further west into “some trans-Mississippi territory.”⁴⁴ His reminiscences in *White-Jacket* about a Sioux who “came stalking out of the crimson West, a gigantic red-man, erect as a pine” project Melville’s consciousness of the transformation of prairie lands as a result of the combination of Jackson’s policies with Euroamerican settlement and commerce. “Moodily wrapped in his blanket, and striding like a king on the stage,” the Sioux “promenaded up

and down the rustic streets . . . in a pioneer village on the western banks of the Mississippi . . . where the stumps of aboriginal trees yet stand in the market-place." In this market-place, where "the remnant tribes of the Sioux Indians . . . [come to] purchase trinkets and cloths," this man, dignified and melancholy, is displaced.⁴⁵

In *John Marr*, Melville goes further, succinctly and sympathetically expressing the plains' Indians history following the arrival of Euroamericans. Marr explains that "The remnant of Indians thereabout—all but exterminated in their recent and final war with regular white troops, a war waged by the Red Men for their native and natural rights—had been coerced into the occupancy of wilds not very far beyond the Mississippi—wilds *then*, but now seats of municipalities and states" (P 197). Here Melville moves beyond general allusions to the destruction of the prairie to refer almost surely to the final defeat in 1832 of Black Hawk and his Sac tribe, who, after years of warfare with American militia caused by unclear treaties, were massacred and banished from Illinois across the Mississippi.⁴⁶

As noted previously, the presence of Illinois' numerous Indian mounds reminded Melville of their builders' absence. Like Bryant in his poetry, Melville, in both *Clarel* and *John Marr*, indicates that, apart from the mounds, the primary presence of the mound builders themselves remained in their bones. Nathan finds "Bones like sea corals; one bleached skull" (I.17.68), and John Marr finds "their pottery and bones, one common clay" (P 195). Eagerly plowing up more and more of the prairie's sod, Illinois farmers failed to identify the effigy and burial mounds and plowed them under with the grasses. Their careless excavations attracted the interest of America's first archaeologists, and bones from the mounds were already on display in Galena by the time of Melville's 1840 visit.⁴⁷ Although the mounds survived on the prairies, John Marr despairingly identifies their makers "as a race only conjecturable" (P 197),⁴⁸ perhaps grieving for Black Hawk's defeat, perhaps grieving for the forced removal of indigenous peoples and the uncontrolled growth of Euroamerican population, commerce, and land ownership. Hershel Parker movingly and justly posits that "the prairie frontier was the first place where [Melville] witnessed, and began to brood upon, the process by which whites were suppressing or even extirpating people of another race."⁴⁹

Melville suggests the interconnections among the lives of prairie-dwellers, noting not only the particular relationship between indigenous people and bison (M 165, MD 618),⁵⁰ but also the simultaneous diminishing of indigenous peoples and prairie creatures. William P. Hornaday, writing in 1887, maintains the bison's disappearance had been completed east of the Mississippi by 1830.⁵¹ Thus in 1840 Melville would not have seen a single bison on the Illinois prairie although the nearly complete extermination of the bison on the western plains did not occur until late in the nineteenth century. In his *Tour on the Prairies*, Irving describes the torturous death of a single bison, which Melville echoes in *Mardi* when he describes a sinking ship: "like unto some stricken buffalo brought low to the plain, the brigantine's black hull, shaggy with sea-weed, lay panting on its flank in the

foam" (M 117). In *Moby-Dick*, Melville movingly reports the disappearance of the "humped herds of buffalo" from the eastern prairies. He testifies that "not forty years ago, [they] overspread by tens of thousands the prairies," lamenting that "at the present day not one horn or hoof of them remains in all that region; and the cause of this wondrous extermination was the spear of man" (MD 460-61). John Marr notes that "the bisons, once streaming countless in processional herds, or browsing as in an endless battle-line over these vast aboriginal pastures, had retreated, dwindled in number" (P 197). Although commenting on the presence of prairie chickens and passenger pigeons on the plains, Marr also observes that "birds were strangely few" (P 197); he could not have known that the once "dense multitudes" of passenger pigeons which he witnessed overhead were soon, unlike the bison, to become entirely extinct.⁵²

Melville's poem, "Trophies of Peace: Illinois in 1840," reflecting on his youthful journey inland, initially does not seem to allude to the loss of plant, animal, and cultural diversity incurred by the transformation of the prairies into agricultural fields, but rather appears to applaud their transformation into the national breadbasket. Melville imagines the fields as glorious standing armies which must be cut down—scythed and stacked—before they can become grain and thus "emblems of peace." As Melville describes this process, Mars, god of war, gives way to Ceres, goddess of agriculture even as the horrors of Civil War had given way in Melville's lifetime to the dubious peace of Reconstruction. However, this process comes at enormous cost as Melville's imagery evokes not only the deaths of young men from the war, but also, I maintain, the loss of the prairie's diverse ecosystem of living plants and animals to "municipalities and states," "wire and rail" and a monoculture of "Files on files of Prairie Maize: / Of hosts of spears" with "rustling streamers." Despite the benefits of a harvest of "golden grain" for the reapers, the weight of Melville's poem is on the implicit loss of undulating grasses and their replacement by a "tasseled dance of death."⁵³

Finally, there is the toll taken on the settlers themselves. In both *Clarel* and *John Marr*, Melville points to the despoiled land's revenge on the despoiler. As the sentient white whale can be interpreted as taking understandable revenge on Ahab and the crew of the *Pequod* for the suffering caused by their weapons, for their relentless pursuit, and for their wasteful and cruel slaughter of other whales, so does the living land inevitably turn against the farmers in *John Marr* and against Nathan, the hard-working American farmer, who seeks to transform the Palestinian desert into Illinois fields in *Clarel*. Although Nathan converted to Judaism, Melville's portrait of him is drawn from the mid-nineteenth-century German, British, and American missionaries, who were committed to transforming the ostensibly empty wastelands of Judea into fertile farmlands: "Here was an object: Up and do! / With seed and tillage help renew— / Help reinstate the Holy Land" (I.17.262-64).⁵⁴ A dreamy and lonely farmer in Illinois, Nathan becomes a zealous farmer-reformer in Palestine, on the one hand disrupting the Bedouin people on whose cherished land he has settled, and on the other ignoring the pleas of his beloved wife and the death of their son. To protect his farm against

the Bedouins from whom he had stolen it, Nathan takes up arms, but his hatred of these people generates a responding hatred which leads directly to his death. In describing Nathan's demonizing of the Bedouins, whom he considered "foes pestilent to God," "slaves meriting the rod" (I.17.306, 309), Melville compares him to Nathan's New England forefathers who not only demonized and dehumanized the Indians of the eastern seaboard but also usurped their lands. As a former Illinois farmer himself, Nathan's derogatory language also reflects the demonizing and dehumanizing of indigenous peoples by Illinois farmers.

In telling Nathan's story of settling a new land, Melville tells an old story, linking this desecration of the Holy Land with the fallen world of America and anticipating a cycle of violence which continues in Palestine and Israel to this day. Ungar, the outspoken half-Indian of *Clarel* generalizes regarding "the Anglo-Saxons" near the conclusion of Melville's long epic poem. He castigates them, claiming they have failed "'To win the love of any race; / Hated by myriads dispossessed / Of rights—the Indians East and West[,]'" calling them "'These pirates of the sphere . . . / [who] Deflower the world's last sylvan glade!'" (IV.9.118-25). The result of the combination of colonization and environmental degradation by Euroamericans, Melville foresees, through Ungar's vehement proclamation, is that "'No New World to mankind remains!'" (IV.22.9).

In *John Marr*, Melville also demonstrates, from an explicitly ecological perspective, that the Euroamerican settlers' damage to the prairie damaged their own lives. As the diversity of plant, animal, and human life on the prairie gave way to monocultures, technology, and towns, so did the quality of the settlers' lives. John Marr refers to "the bane of new settlements on teeming loam, . . . whose sallow livery was certain to show itself, after an interval, in the complexions of too many of these people," identifying this bane as "the dispiriting malaria," which plagues his prairie community and which kills his young wife and child (P 195-96). In writing on the transformation of Illinois' Grand Prairie, historical geographer Michael Urban observes that before agriculture, the prairie was characterized by sloughs and wet potholes which were breeding grounds for malaria-carrying mosquitoes. In converting these wetlands to agricultural usages, however, Urban notes that Euroamerican farmers came to be seriously threatened by these mosquitoes, with malaria becoming the primary cause of death in central Illinois well into the 1850s.⁵⁵ Written twelve years after *Clarel*, *John Marr*'s description of the cultural and social lives of Illinois farmers suggests that these farmers are Nathan's avatars. For these "domestic emigrants, hereditary tillers of the soil," life is endlessly grim as a result of the extreme toil necessitated by their dedication to breaking prairie sod. Marr observes that "through habituation to monotonous hardship," these Americans become reduced to a common denominator: "staid" and "narrowly, religious." They are, he comments, devoid of geniality and art, and having destroyed the diverse life of the prairie, even "the flower of life springing from some sense of joy" has vanished from their lives (P 196).

Although images of the sea and the lives of sailors are prevalent in Melville's writing into the last years of his life, *Clarel*, *John Marr*, and his late poems testify that the North American continent's vast inland sea, which he visited fifty-one years before his death, also remained part of his memory. Melville, yearning in his last years to "Keep true to the dreams of [his] youth,"⁵⁶ might well have remembered in these years the capaciousness of the prairie dreams he had long ago expressed in his early novel, *Mardi*: "Dreams! Dreams! golden dreams; endless, and golden, as the flowery prairies, . . . prairies like rounded eternities . . . and my dreams herd like buffaloes browsing on the horizon, and browsing on round the world" (M 366). However, Melville's sense of the loss of the prairie's wide-open space, its boundless and wondrous diversity of plants, animals, and humans, creates an elegiac tone and an ethical imperative in his last works. As a result of the Euroamerican settlers' acceleration of indifference to others and the intensification of greed leading to their mania for land ownership and control, the prairie that he once associated with "the unfallen western world" was transformed into fenced and plotted agricultural fields. Richard Manning proclaims in *Grassland: The History, Biology, Politics, and Promise of the American Prairie* that "Our culture's disrespect for its grassland has produced an environmental catastrophe. It will be the best measure of the maturing of the American environmental movement when it begins to understand and combat this destruction."⁵⁷ Melville's prairie writings in *Moby-Dick* and his late works appear revealed as a significant step toward the beginning of the American environmental movement, toward understanding and combating the catastrophe which befell the prairies of the American heartland.

Notes

1. Major Steven Long uses this term in reference to Kansas in his *General Description of the Country Traversed by the Exploring Expedition Between the Meridian of Council Bluffs and the Rocky Mountains*, Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1819 and '20*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, 14 vols. (Cleveland: A. H. Clark, 1904-7), 147.

2. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and Newberry Library, 1988), 4. Hereafter references to *Moby-Dick* appear parenthetically in the text as MD.

3. See Leo Marx, "American Institutions and Ecological Ideals" in *The Pilot and the Passenger: Essays on Literature, Technology, and Culture in the United States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 139, and Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1995), 7.

4. See Buell, 7-8. Although I very much respect the work of scholars who read Melville symbolically, my endeavor here is to imagine the actual land which Melville experienced and knew. Thus, my ecocritical reading attempts to abide by the principles set forth by Buell and to present an alternative to such approaches as that of John W. Nichol, Kevin Hayes (both discussed in the note below), and of Basem Ra'ad, who asserts that "Melville uses the visible earth and its cover to construct a symbolic scheme relating to human life and its progress" ["Ancient Lands," *A Companion to Melville Studies*, ed. Wyn Kelley (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 134].

5. Although Cooper published *The Prairie* in 1827, without having seen this land, Irving, Kirkland, Fuller, and Bryant all visited the prairies close to the time of Melville's visit, and all wrote of experiencing this land, Irving in *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835); Kirkland in *A New Home—Who'll Follow?* (1839); Fuller in *Summer on the Lakes* (1844); and Bryant in "An Indian at the Burial Place of His Fathers" (1824) and "The Prairie" (1835). Whitman journeyed to the West in 1879-80 and wrote several short poems focused on the prairie, including "The Prairie Grass Dividing," "The

Prairie States," "A Prairie Sunset," and "A Night on the Prairies." Although Twain traveled by stage coach from Missouri to California, the prairie figures in his works in only a few pages of *Roughing It* (1870).

6. Diane Dufva Quantic, *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), xvi.

7. Given his concern for the cruelty, waste, and greed encouraged by the American whaling enterprise, I have previously argued that in *Moby-Dick*, Melville proves to be "a proto-environmentalist." See "Melville's Environmental Vision in *Moby-Dick*," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, 7.1 (Winter 2000): 97-113.

8. In his landmark 1964 study, *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx considers the implications of Ishmael's query. Interpreting the symbolic implications of the color green, he argues that in the course of the novel Ishmael shifts his understanding of "greenness" as "a token of earthly felicity akin to pastoral hope" to a "principle of survival" [*The Machine in the Garden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 285, 318].

9. From 1850 to 1863, Melville lived at Arrowhead, his farm in the Berkshires, where, committed to writing as a means for providing for his family, he actually devoted very little time to farming.

10. Hershel Parker cites Maria Melville's letter stating that Herman is "thinking of going far-west," *Herman Melville, A Biography, 1819-1851*, I (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 166-67.

11. Although Melville frequently refers to fields and meadows in his writing, this essay responds explicitly to Melville's representation of prairies, which, with tundra, forest, and desert, comprise the earth's four biomes, according to Richard Manning [*Grassland: The History, Biology, Politics, and Promise of the American Prairie* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 2].

12. Melville not only owned Cooper's novel, but his brother, Gansevoort, read *The Prairie* in 1834 and is reported to have been "very well pleased with it." Melville was given the 1840 complete edition of Irving's works (1853) by a friend and also owned Bryant's *Collected Poems* (1863), in which he inscribed his name and the date, "October 12. 1867." See Merton Sealts, *Melville's Reading* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), passim. There is no evidence that Melville read deeply in Fuller, Kirkland, Twain, or Whitman.

13. "Prairies of Illinois," <http://dnr.state.il.us/conversation/naturalheritage/florafauna/document.htm>, 2/07/2009.

14. John W. Nichol, "Melville and the Midwest," *PMLA* 66.5 (Sep. 1951): 616.

15. The date Melville wrote "Trophies of Peace: Illinois in 1840" is unknown although the poem's imagery is anticipated by imagery in *Clarel*, in which Melville also refers to Ceres, the tasseled corn, and its harvest (L.17.177-181).

16. Douglas H. Chadwick, "The American Prairie: Roots of the Sky," encarta.msn.com/sidebar/761593611/the_america_prairie.htm, 2/07/2009. It is estimated that only one per-cent of the nineteenth-century prairie remains in the United States presently.

17. Kevin J. Hayes, *Cambridge Introduction to Herman Melville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Nichol argues that "young Melville's excursion to America's frontier paid off in his later writings; it enriched the texture of his land-sea symbolism and helped him to conceive a composite picture of the 'American' character" (625). Hayes writes that "Delving into the heart of America before seeing the South Pacific, . . . created the opportunity to compare locales and recognize what his national geography represented. . . . The American West embodies the true spirit of the United States" (3). Melville perhaps first expresses the concept that these western lands epitomized American character in *Redburn* when young Wellingborough engages English country people in conversation about America, "A theme which I knew would be interesting, and upon which I could be fluent and agreeable," particularly emphasizing in his conversation Illinois, the Ohio River, and New York's Genesee County with its immense wheat fields. Herman Melville, *Redburn* (Chicago and Evanston: Northwestern University Press and Newberry Library, 1969), 213-14. Subsequent references to *Redburn* appear parenthetically hereafter in the text as R.

18. Herman Melville, *Mardi* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and Newberry Library, 1970), 39, 271, 366, 458. Hereafter references to *Mardi* appear parenthetically in the text as M. No references to the prairie appear in either of Melville's two earliest novels, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), suggesting that they were written while his memories of his South Sea journey were still omnipresent. With *Mardi*, however, he begins to draw on much more diverse material, including his own deeper memories, which would include his youthful journey to Illinois.

19. Herman Melville, *Published Poems* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and Newberry Library, 2009), 260. Hereafter references to *Published Poems* appear parenthetically in the text as P.

20. See Joni L. Kinsey, *Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).

21. Herman Melville, *Redburn* (Chicago and Evanston: Northwestern University Press and Newberry Library, 1969), 213-14.

22. Herman Melville, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), I.17.146. References to lines and cantos in the poem appear parenthetically in the text.

23. Quantic, 39.

24. "Luxuriant" appears in Timothy Flint's description of the prairies in *A Condensed Geography and History of the Western States; or: The Mississippi Valley*, vol. I (Cincinnati, 1818), which is usually cited as Melville's primary source for "The River," the description of the Mississippi River he omitted from *The Confidence Man*. Flint, critically, refers to "the beauty of the prairies skirting this noble river. They impress the eye, as a perfect level; and are in summer covered with a luxuriant growth of grass and flowers." Qtd. in "Editorial Appendix" for *The Confidence Man* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and Newberry Library, 1984), 517.

25. In its exaggerated simplicity, Melville's recognition of the importance of grass as the prairie's most characteristic plant anticipates Emily Dickinson's poem, "To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee."

26. Quantic, 157. Robert Thacker cites twenty entries under "Prairie, likened to ocean" in *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 297.

27. In his last collection of poems, *Weeds and Wildings, Chiefly: With a Rose or Two*, Melville names other flowering plants he may have seen on the Illinois prairies—goldenrod, asters, dandelions, clover, larkspurs, buttercups—all of which are listed as indigenous to the Illinois prairie ("Prairie Wildflowers of Illinois," www.illinoiswildflowers.info/prairie/plant_index.htm, 2/07/2009). Although these "weeds and wildings" may evoke the Albany waysides and the Berkshire meadows of Melville's early years, they may also refer back to his memories of the prairies.

28. Chadwick, *Ibid.*

29. Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man*, 497. Hereafter references to *The Confidence Man* appear parenthetically in the text as CM. It is noteworthy that Flint mentions all of these creatures, among others, in his work (517), but Melville's comparison of the river itself to the streaming herds of bison is uniquely his.

30. See Explanatory Note, *Moby-Dick*, ed. John Bryant and Haskell Springer (New York: Longman, 2007) 559.

31. In both "An Indian at the Burial Place of His Fathers" and "The Prairie," Bryant specifically describes the mounds as burial mounds. Flint also mentions them in his work, referring to the "tombs which rise at frequent intervals along [the river's] banks" (516). Given the frequency with which Melville refers to the mounds in his works, I am inclined to believe that he himself saw them. Cooper, Bryant, and Melville, in describing the mounds, all subscribe to the "myth of the vanishing Indian."

32. I am grateful to Nancy Breed of the Galena Historical Society for describing the mounds near Galena to me in detail. She explains that the Galena mounds were constructed by Woodlands Indians, whereas those in nearby Gramercy Park were constructed by Hopewell Indians. Telephone interview, 17 July 2009.

33. James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, vol. 2 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1896), 519.

34. *Ibid.*, 600.

35. See "Illinois-Population," <http://www.city-data.com/states/Illinois-Population.html>, 2/07/2009, also the discussion in Theodore Calvin Pease's *The Frontier State, 1818-1848* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1922), passim and 382.

36. Flint also uses horses as a measure of the grasses' height: "We often made our way with difficulty on horseback through grass and flowers, as high as our head" (518).

37. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Young American," *The Dial* 4 (1844): 489.

38. Hayes writes, "In Melville's works, the Great Lakes stand for the greatness of America; the prairie represents the nation's natural fecundity; the Mississippi symbolizes political, social, and moral complexities of the nation" (3).

39. Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 111.

40. The Wikipedia entry for John Deere explains that by developing a "smooth sided steel plow" which was better able to cut through prairie sod than wooden plows, Deere "greatly aided migration into the American Great Plains in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries." In 1842, he began manufacturing this plow with great success first in Rock River, Illinois, and then in Moline, Illinois, which gave his thriving plant access to railroads and the Mississippi. For discussion of the role other technology, including railroads and photography, played in the development of the West, see Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography of the American West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

41. Merchant, 137.

42. See Bryant, *Poems*, in Project Gutenberg for references. The first of these quotations is from "An Indian at the Burial Place of His Fathers," the second from "The Prairie." The latter poem was written in 1833, a year after Bryant visited his brothers in Illinois.

43. Prior to Euroamerican contact, the tribes most prevalent in Illinois were the Dakota-Sioux, Winnebago, Miami, Illini, Shawnee, and Chickasaw; following contact, the Delaware, Kickapoo, Ottawa, Potawatami, Sac and Fox, and Wyandot moved into Illinois. See "Native American Tribes of Illinois," www.native-languages.org/illinois.htm, 2/20/2010 and www.accessgenealogy.com/native/illinois/index.htm, 2/07/2009. The census of 1910 shows that although 128 Indians from Illinois tribes were alive at that time, 114 of them were in Oklahoma.

44. In addition to the relocation of Illinois Indians, Florida Seminoles were forced to move into the Dakotas and Carolina Cherokees onto the "Trail of Tears" to Oklahoma. See Laurie Robertson-Lorant's discussion in *Melville: A Biography* (New York: Clarkson-Potter/Publishers, 1996), 81-82.

45. Herman Melville, *White-Jacket* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and Newberry Library, 1970) 266.

46. "Black Hawk War," *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, Sixth Edition, 2008. 19 July 2009, <http://www.encyclopedia.com>.

47. Interview with Breed and Michael Wiant of the Dickson Mounds Museum, 17 July 2009.

48. Thought to have been created by one of Israel's lost tribes or a vestigial group of Greeks or Romans, mounds and earthworks made by native people in North America were known to Euroamericans, including such intellectuals as Noah Webster and Thomas Jefferson, from the eighteenth century. Melville does not, however, give credence to the mound-builders as members of a lost tribe, but I believe implicitly associates them with tribes once living in Illinois. See Gordon Sayre, "The Mound Builders and the Imagination of American Antiquity in Jefferson, Bartram, and Chateaubriand," *Early American History* 33 (1998).

49. Parker, 178.

50. In describing the prairies' vanishing bison in *Moby-Dick*, Melville evokes the disappearance of whales from the sea due to their slaughter by the whaling industry.

51. Qtd. from William P. Hornaday's *Extirpation of the American Bison* in Frank Gilbert Roe, *The North American Buffalo: A Critical Study of the Species in Its Wild State* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951), 367-8.

52. The Wikipedia entry for "Passenger Pigeon" explains that "Some reduction in numbers [of passenger pigeons] occurred because of habitat loss when the Europeans started settling further inland. The primary factor emerged when pigeon meat was commercialized as a cheap food for slaves and the poor in the 19th century, resulting in hunting on a massive scale. There was a slow decline in their numbers between about 1800 and 1870, followed by a catastrophic decline between 1870 and 1890." Clive Ponting writes the elegiac facts of the passenger pigeon: "The passenger pigeon died out in the wild in Ohio about 1900. The last survivor of a species that had once numbered 5 billion died in captivity in 1914." *A Green History of the World* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 170.

53. Herman Melville, *Poems* (London: Constable and Company, Ltd., 1924), 313.

54. Christian missionaries were also committed to converting Jews and Muslims, convinced that their own agricultural settlements which worked to train young Jews in modern farming techniques would hasten the millennium in the Holy Land. See Hilton Obenzinger, *American Palestine: Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), in particular, chapter 7, which discusses Walter Cresson, the zealous American Christian turned Jew, whom Melville encountered in journeying to the Holy Land, and chapter 10, "The Jaffa Colonists and Other Failures."

55. Michael A. Urban, "An Uninhabited Waste: Transforming the Grand Prairie in Nineteenth Century Illinois, USA," *Journal of Historical Geography* 31 (2005): 647-65.

56. Written on a card, this statement was found inside his desk on his death. See Eleanor Melville Metcalf, *Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 384.

57. Manning, 5. William Least Heat-Moon, whose *PrairieErth (A Deep Map): An Epic History of the Tallgrass Prairie Country* (1999) examines the prairie from the perspective of deep ecology, identifies *Moby-Dick* as the book he drew upon most meaningfully in writing his own monumental work (See Jerry Johnston, "Two Writers in Search of America," <http://archive.deseretnews.com/archive/2230623/TWO-WRITERS-IN-SEARCH-OF-AMERICA>, 3/17/2011).

(continued from p. 6)

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